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The Iran Operation: 'Hard Questions That Need Answers Now'

WASHINGTON — It had the appeal of any good Hollywood thriller. Our superbly trained commandos sweep into the United States Embassy in Teheran, snatch the hostages and flee to safety — rescuing America's honor and extricating Jimmy Carter from the Rose Garden.

Was it possible? Or was it doomed from the start?

The overall Carter Administration rescue plan apparently won't be made known for weeks or months — if then — pending reviews by Congressional investigating committees and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Until then, the President has put himself in the position of saying, in effect, to the American people and the world: "Trust me. I had a secret plan to end the war." We last heard that during the Nixon Administration.

Some details of the raid are being leaked daily and, of course, Washington is abuzz with rumors. At this point, less than one week after the aborted mission, there are hard questions that need answers now.

To begin with, was the Central Intelligence Agency brought fully into the planning of the rescue operation? Some of my intelligence sources whose information has been highly reliable in the past complain that planning for the rescue was tightly controlled by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the top level of the Defense Intelligence Agency — to the exclusion of the C.I.A.'s full expertise. A senior Administration official, told of the complaint, responded sharply: "I don't think more than two or three people in the entire Agency knew enough to have an informed opinion. A lot of people are mouthing off because they're angry about being cut out."

A specific focus of complaint is the Pentagon's selection of its landing site for the first step of the mission. That site, in the midst of a vast salt desert more than 200 miles southeast of Teheran, was — as we now know — also adjacent to a highway. As the Pentagon explains it, the intelligence planners for the rescue had known in advance that the highway was in regular use but had analyzed the "rhythm" of traffic, as one official put it, and con-

cluded that the six C-130 aircraft and six helicopters necessary for the mission could rendezvous and refuel without being observed. It was sheer bad luck, a "complete aberration," a senior official said, that an Iranian tour bus happened along just as the first C-130 landed. The 44 passengers on the bus were rounded up and would have been flown out of Iran if the mission had gone ahead.

It should be said that, so far, there is no evidence that the mission was aborted for any reason other than that given by the White House — the breakdown of three helicopters. But how quickly would the disappearance of those 44 Iranians have been noticed? Wouldn't anxious family members have begun asking questions? United States Government officials indicated that no one considered the bus passengers to be a serious hindrance to the operation, since the desert area was known to be heavily trafficked by smugglers and thieves, and, as one official said, "People just would have thought the bus was hijacked."

Other intelligence officials who were not directly consulted on the mission, however, said that the highway in question served as one of the roads between Yezd, a city of 100,000 people, and Meshed, with a population of 300,000, some 400 miles apart, and that there was regular bus service between them. In addition, Meshed, along with Qum, is one of the major religious shrines in Iran — a holy city. There is a constant flow of worshippers to Meshed, where one of Islam's most important religious leaders, the Eighth Imam, is buried. Most of those pilgrims travel at night across the salt desert in an obvious attempt to escape daytime heat.

The selection of that desert site at that time raises questions about some of the assumptions made by the rescue planners about the culture and people of Iran.

One Iranian now living in the United States who still maintains close ties to the Government in Teheran speculated that the desert landing site had been reconnoitered and selected by a former member of Savak, the ousted Shah's secret police, who is now working undercover in Iran for United States intelligence. "The Americans still go back and talk to the same people who have been telling them what they want to hear," the Iranian said. "The old Savak officers have never un-

By Seymour M. Hersh

derstood the revolution. It's a year after it happened and they are still in a daze."

The Iranian added, with obvious bitterness, that testimony given early last year at people's tribunals after the overthrow of Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi had shown why some Savak agents would have been familiar with the desert area selected as the initial American landing zone: Savak considered the area a safe place for tossing anti-Shah political prisoners out of helicopters.

Most of those I interviewed do not believe it was possible for American intelligence agents to have penetrated the relentlessly vigilant student militant group that had direct control of the 50 hostages inside the United States Embassy. Nonetheless there is little doubt that a combination of satellite reconnaissance, electronic intercepts and careful on-the-scene observation by agents could generate enough specific information to provide analysts with a fix on which building in the large embassy area was housing which hostages.

The American effort to establish firmly the location of each hostage was a major one for the intelligence community, and, it should be noted, one of the obvious reasons why the student militants limited any contact between the hostages and other Westerners. Similarly, there is no reason to doubt that the commando team knew how to defuse the mines and explosive devices that are said to ring the inside walls of the embassy.

Even some of the staunchest critics of the rescue effort have suggested in interviews in recent days that the commandos, save for the loss of helicopters, could have penetrated the em-

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bassy grounds by quickly overpowering the few revolutionary guards who would have been posted outside in the early-morning hours of the planned attack.

But how to escape? Whatever the plan — whether by helicopter extraction, by truck to a secondary location, or perhaps through a tunnel system that may exist under the embassy grounds — the commandos inevitably would have found themselves in a fierce battle.

A number of Americans have complained that the Carter Administration does not fully understand the extent of popular support throughout Iran for the militants' action in seizing the hostages.

"The strategy did not take into account the passion of the people and their willingness to act — their spontaneity," said one American with wide experience in post-Shah Iran. "It's a foolish and unreal strategy." He told of having been in Teheran late last year when the national television station presented documents indicating that one of the hostages had served as a spy. "Within 30 seconds, I heard a roar from across the city," the American said. He went to his hotel window, he said, and watched as thousands of Iranians climbed to their rooftops, shouting; "Allah Akbar" ("God is great"). He went on: "And now you have a mass population that's armed — automatic weapons are as common as M & M's at a movie theater." Speaking of last week's aborted mission, he said, "As soon as the gunfire at the embassy started, the people would come running."

All of this raises a final series of questions about anticipated casualties.

What were the odds of rescuing all of the hostages without serious injury or death? What were the odds, as calculated by the mission planners, on returning with, say, 25 of the hostages? Is there any evidence that has not been made public indicating that President Carter acted out of fear that some — or all — of the hostages were nearing a life-or-death situation?

And why did not the Government warn the American reporters and businessmen in Iran — said to number more than 300 — to evacuate before authorizing the rescue mission?

It seems clear that if the operation had been successful, all Americans in the country could have faced serious and perhaps extreme reprisals. Some, perhaps, would have been taken hostage. It seems clear that with economic sanctions and other steps having been consistently threatened in recent months, Mr. Carter could have ordered all newsmen and businessmen to leave Iran weeks ago without necessarily jeopardizing the cover of the operation.

Perhaps the failure of the operation will be as instructive for Jimmy Carter as was the Bay of Pigs for John F. Kennedy in April 1961.

Theodore C. Sorensen, in his 1965 book on the Kennedy Presidency, "Kennedy," revealed that the same advisers who had urged the President to authorize the Bay of Pigs invasion also were urging him in May 1961 to expand the war in Laos. "But now," writes Mr. Sorensen, "the President was far more skeptical of the experts, their reputations, their recommendations, their promises, premises and facts." Mr. Sorensen recorded Mr. Kennedy as exclaiming months later: "Thank God the Bay of Pigs happened when it did. Otherwise, we'd be in Laos by now — and that would be a hundred times worse."

Seymour M. Hersh, a former reporter for The New York Times, is writing a book on Henry A. Kissinger.